

# **SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR SENIOR STAFF POSITIONS**

## **EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT**

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An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The problem was the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department did not have a policy for rotating senior level managers through critical staff positions to provide professional development as part of a succession plan.

The purpose of this applied research project was to develop a draft policy for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department, that addresses the rotation of senior managers through critical staff positions.

The action research method was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits to the organization of rotating senior level managers through critical staff positions?
2. What are similar public and private sector organizations currently doing to prepare managers for positions of increased responsibility?
3. What are the organizational barriers to including successful strategies from similar departments into the draft Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department policy?

Literature searches were initiated at the National Emergency Training Center's (NETC) Learning Resource Center (LRC) and through the Information Services of the Fairfax County, Virginia library system. The literature review involved the search of human resource and organizational development textbooks, professional journals, and reports.

Telephone interviews were conducted with like metropolitan fire departments in the United States. Personal interviews were conducted with several battalion chiefs in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.

The results of the research indicated that the private and the public sector have realized the benefits of identifying potential future leaders within an organization. A well-planned rotation

policy provides organizational overview, encourages interdepartmental cooperation, brings fresh viewpoints to otherwise stagnant sections of the organizations, and promotes flexibility.

The results of the interviews revealed that there are successful policies being utilized in other similar departments. The interviews also indicated several barriers to placing a policy in effect in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.

The researcher recommended the implementation of the draft proposal to rotate senior managers through critical staff positions in Appendix A.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The problem is that the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department does not have a policy for rotating senior level managers through critical staff positions to provide professional development as part of a succession plan.

The purpose of this applied research project is to develop a draft policy for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department, that addresses the rotation of senior managers through critical staff positions.

The action research method is used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits to the organization of rotating senior level managers through critical staff positions?
2. What are similar public and private sector organizations currently doing to prepare managers for positions of increased responsibility?
3. What are the organizational barriers to including successful strategies from similar departments into the draft Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department policy?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department is a combination career and volunteer department comprised of 1,300 uniformed members, 80 civilian personnel, and 300 operational volunteers. The department provides emergency services to 900,000 residents living in 399 square miles in the western suburbs of Washington D.C. Services are provided from 34 fire station locations and four other divisions of the department that support the Operations Division.

The Washington Metropolitan Area experienced tremendous growth during the early 1970s. The Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department's career work force grew equally to

meet the increased service needs. The department hired 260 firefighters from 1970 to 1979. Today 110 of those personnel are eligible to retire (Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department, 2000a). These employees eligible to retire include the Fire Chief, both assistant chiefs, four of seven deputy chiefs, and 10 of the department's 24 battalion chiefs.

The Fairfax County Uniformed Retirement System has evolved through several enhancements in the past 20 years. The most significant was the option for employees to select a straight 25 year retirement with full benefits in place of the traditional civil service system that combines service time with age to determine retirement age (Fairfax County Uniformed Retirement System, 1999). While this meant increased contributions to the employee, it most often resulted in earlier retirement with improved benefits for the majority of the young work force.

The option of a 25-year retirement instigated the problem the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department is now dealing with. Prior to the late 1990s, this issue had not created a problem for the department since large numbers of personnel had not reached their retirement eligibility service time. The significance of the problem has increased in the last several years as those personnel hired in the 1970s have reached their retirement age. The impact of the problem on the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department is that senior members of the department are now beginning to retire, and younger, less experienced personnel are not being moved into various management positions to gain the needed experience. Seven of the 11 uniformed chiefs that make up the department's senior staff are eligible to retire today. Ten of the 24 battalion chiefs are eligible to retire today and an additional eight will be able to retire in the next three years (Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department, 2000a). Eighty percent of the department's personnel from the rank of battalion chief and above will reach retirement eligibility age in the

next three years. If the retirement of the majority of senior department members is not addressed, the research problem will have a tremendous impact on the organizational effectiveness of the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department in the future.

This applied research project is being conducted as a required component of the Executive Development course offered by the National Fire Academy. The issue of developing senior managers for future positions relates directly to the concepts of professional development and organizational change studied in the National Fire Academy's Executive Development course.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A literature review was performed to identify methods of rotating senior managers through various positions that would prepare them for future roles within an organization. Literature searches were initiated at the National Emergency Training Center's (NETC) Learning Resource Center (LRC) in January 2000 during the author's attendance at the National Fire Academy. Additional research was conducted through the Information Services of the Fairfax County, Virginia library system. The literature review involved the search of human resource and organizational development textbooks, professional journals, and reports. Searches were also conducted online through Internet search engines to identify relevant documents.

### **Organizational Benefits of Management Rotation**

The U.S. Postal Service manager for corporate personnel management, Steve Levy, states, "If you're not developing an ongoing succession plan, you're doing a disservice to your organization. It is one of the most important things that a senior executive can do. The company that's going to succeed needs a visionary who plans for succession" (Grossman, 1999,

paragraph 38).

Mondy and Noe (1996) emphasize management development and training. Between six or seven of every 10 American managers have significant shortcomings in managerial abilities. Management development should consist of all learning experiences required to serve in current and future managerial positions. Companies have discovered that organizational growth and effectiveness are tied to successful programs that provide challenges and insight to the future needs of the organization. Management development is an approach to ensure that personnel with the proper qualifications and experience are available to fill key roles when needed (Mondy & Noe).

This information influenced the research because it emphasized the need for organizations to provide development opportunities for tomorrow's leaders.

Mondy and Noe (1996) discuss the issue of revitalizing veteran employees by providing them with new challenges and opportunities for learning and contribution. Personnel who remain in jobs for three or more years often become unresponsive to job features, variety, and feedback. Rotation of employees to new more challenging jobs every three years will often sustain motivation and satisfaction (Mondy & Noe).

Organizations should strive to identify and develop future talent internally when possible. These individuals should be placed in advanced training programs, job rotation programs, and receive mentoring by senior executives. This is often referred to as a "grow-your-own strategy" and can not only save an organization money, but develop leaders with institutional knowledge (Schmidt, 1999).



Employees that are given challenging jobs early in their career are generally more successful when they are placed in jobs with increasing challenges and responsibilities (Cummings & Worley, 1993).

A well-planned position rotation policy has many benefits to an organization. It provides an organizational point of view and encourages interdepartmental cooperation. Fresh viewpoints are often introduced to various sections and it also promotes flexibility within the organization. Broadening the background and experience of future leaders is the major objective of position rotation policies (Flippo, 1984).

State and local government officials tend to think strategically only during their tenure, whether elected or appointed. They must develop the willingness and ability to enter into some type of strategic planning for the future. These efforts will include identifying future potential leaders in the organization and developing them. This planning process will not only help strategically during the current tenure of officials, but also benefit the organization in the future (Schall, 1997).

The literature regarding the benefits of rotating future senior managers in organizations influenced the research because it identified the many positive aspects of having a leadership development policy as part of a succession plan.

### **Current Successful Methods used in the Public and Private Sector**

The private sector is using several different strategies to provide the breadth of knowledge and experience that is required for tomorrow's managers (Cummings & Worley, 1993). Corning Glass Works and Hewlett-Packard have attempted to identify employees with the potential for assuming top management positions. They provide them with cross-directional

job experiences, which include rotation into new areas, once they have demonstrated competence in a particular specialty area. (Cummings & Worley).

Cummings and Worley (1993) define “job pathing” as a very effective method of career development. This involves development of a series of job assignments designed to expand an employee’s skills, knowledge, and competence. Employees gain valuable work-related competence through work experience that requires new skills and abilities.

As jobs grow increasingly complex and impersonal, the need for improved personal skills becomes critical for development plans for managers. This type of development prepares employees to grow with an organization and look forward to the future. Preparing managers to be good human relations people is beneficial to any organization that wants to succeed (Mondy & Noe, 1996).

Human resource forecasting is being used as a critical component of the management planning process according to Mondy and Noe (1996). Human resource needs must be completed based on strategic plans, current and future trends, customer needs, and technological advances. The results of this type of instrument are an overview of employees with specific skills and experience to meet these projected demands and the organization’s goals (Mondy & Noe).

These findings influenced the research because it verified the fact that there are successful strategies being employed in organizations today and encouraged the author that the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department can put a similar policy in effect to address like issues.

The Tucson, Arizona Fire Department has begun a program in recruit school that introduces the new firefighter to the mission of the fire service. This includes the fact that, to be

an effective senior member of the department, one must work in both staff and operational assignments. This will help the department to address both current and future needs (Ross, 1998).

The Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department Career Development Plan (2000) outlines very clear educational requirements for each position on the career ladder. The current Fire Chief has endorsed this program.

The Austin, Texas Fire Department assigns staff positions to newly promoted individuals from eligibility lists if voluntary transfers are not requested (Laurich, 1995). According to Laurich, some departments require a tour of duty in a staff assignment, while others allow top finishers on promotional lists their choice of assignment. St. Petersburg, Florida has opened management staff positions to lower ranks to increase training opportunities and increase the eligibility pool of candidates for future staff positions (Laurich).

Laurich (1995) provides several incentive ideas that fire departments have used to increase morale and productivity of personnel in staff assignments. These include alternate work schedules, take home vehicles, and pay incentives.

Colgate-Palmolive has instituted a plan where personnel with identified leadership potential are matched with managers at different levels throughout the organization. These managers serve as mentors and provide needed skills enhancement. This often includes stretch assignments and customized training at comparable levels within the company (Beeson, 2000).

Robert Grossman (1999) of *HR Magazine* highlighted the management development program at UNUM Insurance Company in Portland, Maine. The “emerging leaders of the future” are identified and put through a management internship program. The most promising of the “emerging leaders” are assigned to a key executive for approximately one year. They travel

with the executives, attend meetings, and literally mirror everything they do during this time period. This provides a solid background and view of the organization outside of the specific sector the “emerging leader” may have been working in (Grossman).

According to Steve Kirn, Vice President of Organizational Learning and Development of Sears Roebuck, executive development is a huge priority. Sears builds strategic components into key operational jobs where potential leaders are assigned. He describes how Sears identifies about 40 of these jobs and defines the unique challenges and experiences that each job provides. Potential leaders are placed in these positions and then moved across lines to give them multi-line exposure in administrative and service-oriented environments (Grossman, 1999).

These findings influenced the research because it emphasized to the author that identifying potential leaders in an organization is very critical in the entire process of developing a strategic plan for the future.

### **Limitations to Strategies**

According to Schmidt (1999), the fundamental problem begins with a lack of talent coming into the bottom of the management trainee pool. Business schools are placing candidates in the work force that lack critical business skills. These include decision making, problem solving, and critical thinking. These are skills that current executives and senior managers have perfected over years. “Things are becoming so technology-based that we are losing our thinking abilities” (Schmidt, 1999, paragraph 16). Technology is providing managers answers in the technical arena, but newer managers are not coming forward with the ability to think during complex situations and reason with abundant amounts of information (Schmidt).

Grossman (1999) wrote about the imbalance between technical skills and leadership ability. There has been great importance placed on one’s technical competence without regard to

their leadership ability. Tomorrow's managers must learn about human relations. In many cases this can only come from experiences dealing with these types of issues. "Technical experience is critical, but not at the expense of wisdom and creativity." Leadership development, as well as technical training, must be incorporated into career development programs (Grossman).

These findings influenced the research because it pointed out the importance that needs to be placed on a manager's leadership abilities in relation to their technical competence.

There are still many large companies that are not doing any type of succession planning (Grossman, 1999). They don't get around to making the long-term time and financial commitments needed to develop an ongoing succession plan, because they are too busy focusing on new profits and current delivery methods.

Grossman (1999) also addresses the fact that it is very uncomfortable for top management in some organizations to discuss who will take their places. The intent to develop a plan often gets lost in the daily, demanding pressures and the mindset that "nobody can do the job as good as you can."

The average tenure of public sector agency heads is less than two years (Schall, 1997). The demands and expectations placed on the agency head are tremendous. There are continuing attempts to increase the learning curve so that these executives reach full speed quicker, but they are falling short in many cases. These agency heads are often looked at as short-term leaders rather than institutional builders. Agency heads are often reluctant to spend time planning for what will be another person's problem down the road (Schall).

This literature influenced the research in the sense that it demonstrates reasons why senior executives in both the public and private sector do not address successions planning and the preparation of personnel for leadership roles.

To develop an effective human resource-planning tool, an organization must be able to tie their plan to a well-designed strategic plan (Mondy & Noe, 1996). The strategic plan must be based on solid trends, technology advances, demographic changes, customer needs, and service delivery changes. A strategic plan must be in place for both the short-term and the long-term (Mondy & Noe).

This literature is significant and influenced the research because the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department does not have a strategic plan in place.

Laurich (1995) found that most fireground officers are uncomfortable moving from an operations position to a staff position. They did not feel like they have the administrative skills to function in the administrative environment. Forced assignment of individuals into staff positions has had a negative effect on otherwise excellent employees in the Colorado Springs Fire Department. Entering staff assignments often means taking on programs with little or no assistance. This is often times accompanied by poor direction and the lack of a complete job description (Laurich). Officers assigned to staff positions in the Colorado Springs Fire Department are frustrated by long hours, limited time off, budget restraints, and lack of appreciation. They also feel that they were not trained well enough for staff positions (Laurich).

According to Laurich (1995), officers felt that they received little support from upper management when moving into staff positions. Incumbents for staff positions had already left when newly transferred or promoted officers came into their new position with very little direction. This is interpreted as a lack of support by upper management.

This literature influenced the researcher because it outlines some of the impeding forces to placing a successful program in place in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. The

findings also highlighted the fact that there are several ways to accommodate rotating personnel through management positions to increase leadership skills.

## **PROCEDURES**

### **Definition of Terms**

Career Development Plan. Listing of the various educational requirements for each rank within the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.

Job Rotation. The practice of moving personnel through various job assignments to provide a broad knowledge base and gain experience in various aspect of an organization.

Senior Staff. A combination of uniformed and civilian division and section heads that provide information and input to the Fire Chief.

Staff Position. Any assignment outside of the Operations Division (i.e. Training, Support, Resource Management, Fire Prevention).

Uniformed Personnel. Sworn department members that have completed firefighting recruit school.

### **Limitations**

The only limitation identified during the research of the problem was that only two of the eight like size metropolitan fire departments responded to requests for interviews.

### **Research Methodology**

The action research method is used to examine the identified problem. This is accomplished through literature review and telephone interviews with personnel in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department and like size departments in the United States.

The problem was rechecked for clarity and comprehensiveness. It is determined that the problem did not change in nature.

The goal of the research is to develop a draft policy to address succession planning at the senior manager level in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.

The existing situational forces assisting in the attainment of the goal are determined by applying a force field analysis model. A contributing factor in obtaining the goal is the eligibility of 80 percent of department managers from the rank of battalion chief and above will be eligible to retire in the next three years. An existing situational force that assists in the attainment of the goal is the desire of the Fire Chief to establish a method to provide professional development to senior staff members by placing them in various roles within the organization.

The existing situational forces likely to impede reaching the goal are determined by applying a force field analysis model. A contributing factor likely to impede the attainment of the goal is the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department has no long range strategic plan to address pending retirements and the associated openings at senior management levels.

The strategy to increase those forces for obtaining the goal is to develop a draft proposal for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department that will address the rotation of senior managers as a part of a department succession plan.

The strategy to minimize the impeding forces is to identify successful strategies in the public and private sector as well as like fire and rescue departments.

The methods to achieve a measurable outcome of the identified strategies are to perform a literature review and conduct interviews with like size departments in the United States.

Literature searches were initiated at the National Emergency Training Center's (NETC) Learning Resource Center (LRC) in January 2000 during the author's attendance at the National Fire Academy. Additional research was conducted through the Information Services of the Fairfax County, Virginia library system. The literature review involved the search of human



resource and organizational development textbooks, professional journals, and reports. Searches were also conducted online through Internet search engines to identify relevant documents.

The impact of the literature review was that the author could identify various strategies that have been successful in preparing officers for senior management positions.

### **Interviews**

The author conducted two sets of telephone interviews. One set of interviews was with executive officers of like metropolitan departments. These officers were chosen because their respective departments are facing similar staffing issues. The subjects were asked if their department has any type of succession plan in place that addresses rotating personnel through staff positions. If so, what have been the biggest barriers to making the system work properly? They were also asked if their respective department provided incentives of any type for personnel working in administrative assignments.

An interview was conducted via telephone with Division Chief Matthew Vadala, Orange County Fire Authority, Orange County, California on June 19, 2000. Chief Vadala is a division commander in charge of two battalions in the Operations Division of the Orange County Fire Authority. Chief Vadala has served in both staff and field assignments in the department and is very familiar with the department's career development programs. The Orange County Fire Authority in Orange County, California was selected because it is very similar in size and organizational make-up as the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. The purpose of the interview was to determine if the Orange County Fire Authority has a policy in place that involves rotating chief officers through staff positions to improve leadership skills and enhance career development.

An interview was conducted via telephone with Battalion Chief Scott Cooper, Chesterfield Fire Department, Chesterfield, Virginia on June 11, 2000. Chief Cooper is a battalion chief in charge of a battalion in the Operations Division of the Chesterfield Fire Department. Chief Cooper has served in both staff and field assignments in the department and is familiar with the department's career development programs. The Chesterfield Fire Department in Chesterfield County, Virginia was selected because it is very similar in organizational make-up as the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. The purpose of the interview was to determine if the Chesterfield Fire Department has a policy in place that involves rotating chief officers through staff positions to improve leadership skills and enhance career development.

The researcher conducted a second set of interviews within the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. The second set of interviews was conducted with personnel at the rank of battalion chief within the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. These chief officers were selected because of their tenure in the department. These personnel were asked the reason that they have elected not to apply for any deputy chief positions within the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.

A telephone interview was conducted with Battalion Chief Robert Witherow on June 17, 2000. Battalion Fire Chief Witherow commands the first battalion and supervises sixty personnel out of five stations on his shift. Chief Witherow was selected because he has over 23 years of experience in the department, and he has worked in both administrative and operational positions during his career. The purpose of the interview was to determine the reasons that he has elected not to apply for deputy chief positions in the department.

A telephone interview was conducted with Battalion Chief Michael Wood on June 19, 2000. Battalion Fire Chief Wood is in charge of the fifth battalion and supervises personnel working out of five station locations in his battalion. Chief Wood was selected because he has worked within several divisions during his career. He is a certified paramedic and has worked in both suppression and EMS during his assignments in Operations. The purpose of the interview was to determine the reasons that he has elected not to apply for deputy chief positions in the department.

A telephone interview was conducted with Battalion Chief Chris Hunter on June 17, 2000. Battalion Fire Chief Hunter is currently assigned to the fifth battalion and supervises personnel working out of five station locations in his battalion. Chief Hunter was selected because he has held positions in Administration and Operations during his career. The purpose of the interview was to determine the reasons that he has elected not to apply for deputy chief positions in the department.

## **RESULTS**

### **Organizational Benefits of Management Rotation**

Both the public and the private sector have recognized the need to plan for leadership changes in the future to meet the goals of the organization.

According to the findings of the literature review, many new managers today do not possess the necessary leadership skills required of top management positions. New challenges and growth opportunities are critical in developing tomorrow's leaders. Identification of future leadership talent from within the organization is a key first step to designing a succession plan.

The research indicates many advantages of job enrichment and mentoring programs. Organizational development needs to be tied to an effective program that provides insight to the future for managers. The literature defined a well-planned rotation policy as one that has many benefits to an organization. It provides an organizational overview, encourages interdepartmental cooperation, brings fresh viewpoints to otherwise stagnant sections of the organization, and it promotes flexibility.

The literature review indicated that, in most cases public sector officials tend to think of issues that will impact an organization only during their tenure. Public sector managers and agency heads must be able to identify future leaders and be willing to look strategically into the future.

The research indicated that there are many benefits to an organization when providing managers with a very broad background of experience and skill-building experiences.

### **Current Successful Methods used in the Public and Private Sector**

The literature review indicates that both the public sector and the private sector realize the benefits of placing current and future leaders in positions that require new skills and abilities. Both sectors stress the need to identify potential leaders early in an organization. Several successful management rotation and development methods are identified. These include mentoring, job rotation, and job pathing. The literature states that the human relations portion of executive development is being left behind for technological competence.

Telephone interviews conducted with like metropolitan fire departments revealed that there are management development programs that involve rotating personnel through various staff assignments to gain a broad range of organizational skills.

The Orange County Fire Authority in Orange County, California has several programs in place to address the development of future officers. These include mentoring, officer core classes, and field and staff rotations. According to the research, personnel must work in staff assignments, as well as operations, positions prior to being considered for the rank of battalion chief and above.

The Chesterfield Fire Department in Virginia has a policy in place that requires personnel to rotate through staff positions for three to five years. The Fire Chief has endorsed this policy as a part of the department's succession plan. Research indicates that the Chief wants to prepare his senior managers for positions of leadership in the department.

The research indicates to the author that there are several successful strategies in place in both the public and private sector that will prepare emerging leaders for leadership roles within their specific organizations.

### **Limitations to Strategies**

The research indicates that there are several limitations to any strategy that places personnel in staff or administrative positions. These limitations fell into two distinct areas. The literature indicates that many managers in leadership positions today are very technically competent, but lack human relations skills that are paramount in being an effective leader. The literature indicates that there is a lack of talent coming into the bottom of the management training pool. Business institutions are placing individuals in the work force that lack critical business skills.

The research also indicates that public sector employees were often times very reluctant to voluntarily take on staff assignments. The literature indicates that a change in organizational culture must take place. Operations oriented personnel feel a lack of support from upper

management when moved into staff positions. Personnel forced into staff positions due to vacancies failed to perform at their previous levels. Research indicates that scheduling issues and lack of incentives in some cases would be limitations to implementing successful strategies.

The results of interviews conducted within the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department support the other findings. Two of the three battalion chiefs interviewed cited fiscal compensation and scheduling concerns as reasons they have not elected to apply for the rank of deputy chief which would possibly place them in a staff position. The third interviewee stated that his concerns focus on credibility. Not that he felt incapable, but that he would feel uncomfortable being placed in a deputy position over personnel that had been working in their position as battalion chiefs for 10 and 15 years.

A draft proposal for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department that addresses the rotation of senior managers as a development tool can be found in Appendix A.

## **DISCUSSION**

The skill sets required for today's fire service leaders are different than those of our predecessors. Fire service leaders today must be able to look to the future to develop strategic plans to deal with the changing role of the fire service.

The organizations that are going to succeed are those who plan for succession. Those that are not developing an ongoing succession plan are doing a disservice to their organization (Grossman, 1999). The advantages of job enrichment and mentoring programs were well defined in the research. Organizational development needs to be tied to an effective program that provides insight to the future for managers (Grossman).

A well-planned position rotation policy has many benefits to an organization. It provides an organizational point of view; encourages interdepartmental cooperation, since managers have seen multiple sides of issues; provides fresh viewpoints, which are often introduced to various sections, and it promotes flexibility within the organization. Broadening the background and experience of future leaders is the major objective of position rotation policies (Flippo, 1984).

Mondy and Noe agree with this to the point that they state that employees should be moved every three to five years. This prevents an employee from becoming stale and provides new opportunities for learning and contribution to the organization (Mondy & Noe, 1996).

Cummings and Worley (1993) discussed how employees who were given challenging jobs early in their career were more successful when placed in roles with increased challenges and responsibilities. Many of the successful leaders in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department today come from a background of varied and challenging assignments.

It is the opinion of the researcher that a rotation policy for managers is one of the keys to providing managers with a broad base of knowledge and experience as they move into senior level jobs. This is equally true for operations and staff assignments. An organization that does not plan for this will place managers with little overall organizational knowledge in high level positions.

The implications for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department are significant. The findings state clearly that senior managers in both the public and private sector must have a very extensive background to meet the demands of today's customers and must be able to develop a strategic plan for tomorrow. Eighty percent of the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department's senior level managers are eligible to retire in the next three years. If the Fire Chief does not support a program to provide his future leaders with the expansive experience and background

they will need to run the Department, the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department will suffer in the long run.

Schall (1997) states that state and local government officials tend to think strategically only during their tenure whether elected or appointed. The research indicates that agency heads often think strategically only during their tenure. The typical term for an agency head is no more than a couple of years or until a new board is elected. They must develop the willingness and ability to enter into some type of strategic planning for the future. These efforts will include identifying and developing future potential leaders in the organization. This planning process will not only help strategically during the current tenure of officials, but also will benefit the organization in the future (Schall).

It is the opinion of the researcher that this is not necessarily the case in many metropolitan government settings. Strategic planning meetings are held on a regular basis for agency heads within the Fairfax County Government. The author would agree that agency heads are encouraged and educated on strategic planning issues, but these intentions do not always make it to the policy writing stage. The failure to produce such a plan can be the result of many obstacles.

These findings are relevant to the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. For many years, the department has had good intentions to put a strategic plan in place. This has never been formally accomplished. The implications of not planning for the succession of senior managers are that executive level chief officers will not have the background and experience to deal with the changing demand of tomorrow's fire service.



The research indicates that there are successful methods in place in both the public and private sector that address the rotation of emerging leaders into positions that require new skills and abilities.

According to Cummings and Worley (1993), the private sector is using several different strategies to provide the breadth of knowledge and experience that is needed for tomorrow's managers. Corning Glass Works and Hewlett-Packard have attempted to identify employees with the potential for assuming top management positions. They provide them with cross-directional job experiences, which include rotation into new areas, once they have demonstrated competence in a particular specialty area. It is the opinion of the researcher that this has been done unofficially in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department for some time now. Talented supervisors have always identified personnel under their command that have the potential to become leaders. They have then become an unofficial mentor and provided career insight to these individuals.

Colgate-Palmolive has instituted a plan where personnel with identified leadership potential are matched with managers at different levels throughout the organization. These managers serve as mentors and provide needed skills enhancement. This often includes stretch assignments and customized training at a comparable level within the company (Beeson, 2000).

It is the researcher's opinion that mentoring is a valid alternative to job rotation strategies. Staffing limitations will often limit a department's ability to dedicate full-time mentors to potential leaders. The practice of placing leaders in assignments outside their normal duties does cause a manager to grow.

These findings have great implications for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. The Department has historically only moved individuals in senior staff positions

when promotions or retirements came about. It is the viewpoint of the researcher that the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department is a large enough department that it would be relatively easy to provide a very broad background of knowledge and experience to up-and-coming officers by rotating them through the five different divisions of the department.

Ross (1998) states that the Tucson, Arizona Fire Department has begun a program in recruit school that introduces new firefighters to the mission of the fire service. This includes the fact that to be an effective senior member of the department, one must work in both staff and operational assignments. This will help the department address both current and future needs.

The researcher agrees with the Tucson Fire Department's philosophy and believes that organizational change and career development are important issues for the fire service. Today's fire service is much different than the one the researcher entered in the late nineteen seventies. The customer demands are different and the skill sets for successful leaders have changed. It is the opinion of the researcher that this organizational change can take place within the fire service.

The Austin, Texas Fire Department assigns staff positions to newly promoted individuals from eligibility lists if voluntary transfers are not requested (Laurich, 1995). Some departments require a tour of duty in a staff assignment, while others allow top finishers on promotional lists their choice of assignment.

The researcher agrees with the concept of allowing the top finisher on a promotional list to select his or her assignment within certain boundaries. The researcher does not agree with placing newly promoted employees in staff positions as their first assignment. Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department management has supported placing newly promoted employees in staff positions in the past. The researcher's experience has shown that this has been

unsuccessful, in some cases, individuals were not able to perform in the field once they left an administrative job. It becomes increasingly difficult to discipline for performance once an individual has completed their probationary year. In other circumstances, individuals have stayed in staff positions for more than 10 years and are unable to function at their rank in the Operations Division. It is the opinion of the researcher that unless medical conditions prevent an employee from working in the field, uniformed members of the department must be able to perform at their present rank while assigned to the Operations Division.

Laurich (1995) provides several incentive ideas that departments have used to increase morale and productivity of personnel in staff assignments. These include alternate work schedules, take home vehicles, and pay incentives. The researcher believes that incentives are an important consideration for administrative positions.

Chiefs Witherow and Hunter (personal communication June 17, 2000) from the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department indicated scheduling and fiscal compensation concerns as reasons that they had chosen not to apply for deputy chief positions that could possibly place them in staff assignments.

It is the opinion of the researcher that incentives should be included in staff job assignments. Personnel lose shift differential, schedule flexibility, and opportunities for overtime when they take administrative assignments. This has implications for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. The department has provided take-home vehicles to senior staff for some time; however, the literature indicates that other incentives need to be considered for today's work force.

The Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department (2000) has a career development program that outlines specific educational requirements that must be obtained prior to testing for

each rank. The researcher's opinion is that this is a vital component of a program that will provide varied experience and education to tomorrow's fire service leaders.

According to interviews conducted with several other like size metropolitan departments, there are several successful methods of senior manger development being used today. Chief Matthew Vadala (personal communication June 19, 2000) provided information about the Orange County Fire Authority. The Orange County Fire Authority in Orange County, California has several programs in place to address the development of future officers. These include mentoring, officer core classes, and field and staff rotations. According to the research, personnel must work in staff assignments as well as operations positions prior to being considered for the rank of battalion chief and above.

Battalion Chief Scott Cooper (personal communication, June 11, 2000) provided information regarding the Chesterfield Fire Department. The Chesterfield Fire Department in Virginia has a policy in place that requires personnel to rotate through staff positions for three to five years. The Fire Chief has endorsed this policy as a part of the department's succession plan. Research indicates that he wants to prepare his senior managers for positions when they will lead the department in the future.

The research findings impact the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department's career development policies. The department has made big strides towards providing an infrastructure and career path for its future leaders. Armed with the knowledge from the research, it is the opinion of the author that the addition of a job rotation requirement into the existing career development program in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department would be beneficial to the department.

Interviews conducted within the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department support the research findings that personnel are reluctant to take staff positions. Two of the three battalion chiefs interviewed cited fiscal compensation and scheduling concerns as reasons they have not elected to apply for the rank of deputy chief which would possibly place them in a staff position. The third interviewee stated that his concerns focus on credibility. Not that he felt incapable, but that he would feel uncomfortable being placed in a deputy position over personnel that had been working in their position as battalion chiefs for 10 and 15 years. The author agrees that these findings are consistent with other departments throughout the country based upon his professional relationships with other fire service leaders. The reluctance of very qualified individuals to voluntarily take on positions of increased responsibility is a great limitation to any strategy.

Today's work force is changing. According to Schmidt (1999), the fundamental problem begins with a lack of talent coming into the bottom of the management trainee pool. Business schools are placing candidates in the work force that lack critical business skills. These include decision making, problem solving, and critical thinking. These are skills that current executives and senior managers have perfected over years. "Things are becoming so technology based that we are losing our thinking abilities" (Schmidt, 1999, paragraph 16). Technology is providing managers answers in the technical arena, but newer managers are not coming forward with the ability to think during complex situations and reason with abundant amounts of information (Schmidt).

Grossman (1999) wrote about the imbalance between technical skills and leadership ability. There has been great importance placed on one's technical competence without regard to one's leadership ability. Tomorrow's managers must learn about human relations. In many

cases, this can only come from experiences dealing with these types of issues. Technical experience is critical, but not at the expense of wisdom and creativity. Leadership development, as well as technical training, must be incorporated into career development programs (Grossman).

The researcher's opinion is that the educational requirements are important, but there is no substitute for experience. The fire service continues to promote "book smart" officers. Seasoned leaders are retiring from the department and the members promoted to take their place have had little practical experience. This is not always the fault of the individual; however, the department has the responsibility to provide the cross training and leadership enhancement. This can be done with a solid succession plan that incorporates job rotation.

State and local government officials tend to think strategically only during their tenure whether elected or appointed. Schall (1997) states that agency heads must develop the willingness and ability to enter into some type of strategic planning for the future. These efforts will include identifying and developing future potential leaders in the organization. This planning process will not only help strategically during the current tenure of officials, but benefit the organization in the future (Schall).

These findings have implications to the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department because there is not currently a strategic plan in place for the agency. Virtually all of the literature indicated that a useful succession plan must be just one component of a strategic plan for any department. The department is currently exploring the fire accreditation process. It is this author's opinion that if the department elects to continue through the accreditation process, the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department will have a solid strategic plan for the future.

The implications of these research findings are significant to the future of the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department because they identify the need and benefits associated with the implementation of a senior management rotation policy as a professional development tool.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **What are the benefits to the organization of rotating senior level managers through critical staff positions?**

The private sector has realized the benefits of effective succession planning. New growth opportunities and challenges are important when developing future leaders in any organization. A well-defined rotation policy has many benefits to an organization. It includes an organizational overview, encourages interdepartmental cooperation, and brings fresh viewpoints to different parts of the organization.

The public sector has not been as fast to grasp the concepts of strategic planning. This has been particularly true in the fire service. Many departments are now facing huge numbers of senior managers that are eligible for retirement.

It is the recommendation of the researcher that the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department use the draft policy on rotation of senior management in Appendix A. The draft proposal addresses the organizational benefits of rotating personnel through a series of management positions.

**What are similar public and private organizations currently doing to prepare managers for positions of increased responsibility?**

The research indicates that there are many successful methods being used in both the public and private sector. Both sectors stress the need to identify the potential leaders in their respective organizations as early as possible.

The public sector has embraced policies that include mentoring, job rotation, and job pathing. The rotation of personnel through various staff assignments provides individuals with a broad range of organizational and human relation skills.

Public safety organizations have incorporated staff rotation policies into their career development and succession strategies. While each policy differs to some degree, they each seem to incorporate the core idea that working in administrative jobs at various levels and divisions within the department is beneficial to the future of the organization and to the individual. Serving in a staff assignment is a prerequisite to promotion to battalion chief in several departments.

The draft proposal located in Appendix A recommends that personnel serve in staff positions for a certain time period and that this becomes a prerequisite to obtaining the position of deputy chief and above. It is the recommendation of the researcher that the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department utilize the draft proposal presented in Appendix A.

**What are the organizational barriers to including successful strategies from similar departments into the draft Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department policy?**

The researches indicates that employees entering management level positions are technically competent, but lack many of the human relations and leadership skills to be effective supervisors. This holds true in public and private sector organizations.



It is the recommendation of the researcher that human relations and leadership skills be incorporated in career development programs. Job rotations should include areas of an organization where these types of skills can be experienced and mastered. The researcher also recommends that agency heads should look to other agencies within their locality to provide emerging leaders with experience in dealing with local and regional government entities.

The research also indicated that work hours and lack of compensation are barriers to implementing a successful job rotation policy in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. The research indicates that other like departments have used different incentives to accommodate personnel working in staff positions.

It is the recommendation of the researcher that incentives be provided to personnel working in staff assignments. The draft proposal in Appendix A includes several forms of incentives that the researcher recommends the Fire Chief implement.

The researcher recommends that the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department adopt the draft proposal in Appendix A to provide senior management with the background and organizational leadership skills to carry the department into the future. This policy should become part of an overall strategic plan for the department. The effectiveness of the recommendations will not be able to be evaluated for five to seven years. At that time, the senior executives of the department should begin to possess a very broad array of organizational experience.

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## APPENDIX A

### Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department

#### **Draft Policy Recommendation:** *Senior Staff Position Rotation*

**Date:** July 3, 2000

#### **PURPOSE:**

To establish a method of rotating uniformed senior staff members of the Fire and Rescue Department through various positions within the department to provide increased knowledge and experience.

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

It shall be the policy of the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department to place personnel in senior management level positions that have a broad background of experience in the department. This includes knowledge of the different divisions within the department as well as those entities within the Fairfax County Government that the department deals with on a regular basis. The department can provide this development through education and training of its personnel.

#### **II. GENERAL POLICY**

- A. Personnel promoted to the rank of battalion chief must have served in at least two divisions of the Fire and Rescue Department prior to their promotion. Personnel promoted to the rank of battalion chief shall serve their probationary year in the Operations Division as a battalion commander. The Fire Chief must approve exceptions to this policy.
- B. Personnel promoted to the rank of deputy chief must have served in at least three divisions of the Fire and Rescue Department prior to their promotion. Personnel promoted to the rank of deputy chief shall serve their probationary year in the Operations Division as a shift operations deputy. The Fire Chief must approve exceptions to this policy.
- C. Personnel at the rank of battalion chief and above must serve a two-three year commitment once assigned to a position. The exception to this is promotion or reduction in rank of an individual.

#### **III. DEFINITIONS**

- A. **Tour of Duty** – A “tour of duty” is defined as a single two-three year commitment in one position for senior staff members.

B. **Staff Assignment** – Any position assigned to one of the following divisions or sections:

1. Fire Prevention
2. Support Services
3. Training
4. Special Operations
5. Human Resources
6. Occupational Health and Safety

#### IV. **POSITION ROTATION**

- A. Senior staff personnel shall rotate between divisions every three years. Senior staff personnel may serve a maximum of two tours of duty in administrative positions. One of every three tours of duty must be worked in an Operations field assignment. One exception to this is employee medical restrictions.
- B. The department will dual encumber a position for a maximum of two pay periods (four weeks) to provide a transition period for new assignments. Coverage for vacancies will be provided during this transitional period.
- C. The department will explore other opportunities to provide managers with as much diversification as possible. These may include, but not be limited to other positions within the County Government on a limited basis (i.e. County Executive Internship Program). There are also partnerships that will be considered within the private sector or other non-profit organizations.
- D. Personnel in staff assignments are encouraged to submit transfer requests on an annual basis to maintain the validity of the database in the event that a promotion or other personnel action takes place necessitating a transfer of personnel.

#### V. **ADMINISTRATIVE INCENTIVES**

- A. Personnel assigned to staff assignments will be provided incentives to offset compensation and flexible scheduling provided while assigned to an Operations position. These will include the following:
  1. Five percent (5%) pay step increase on base salary amount
  2. Take home vehicle if position is subject to after hours recall to duty.
  3. Compressed workweek or flexible scheduling.
  4. Training and travel opportunities.
  5. Priority overtime consideration for Operations work to fill vacancies.
  6. Laptop computer issue during tour of duty.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Questionnaire**

#### **Interview Questions for Similar Departments.**

1. Does your department currently have a policy in place that addresses succession planning? If so, does it include any type of job rotation or senior management positions?
2. Does your department provide any incentives for personnel working in administrative positions?
3. If your agency does have a policy in place, what have been the biggest barriers to successful implementation?

#### **Interview Questions for Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department Battalion Chiefs.**

1. Are you eligible for the rank of deputy chief in the department?
2. What are the reasons that you have elected not to apply for a deputy chief position within the department?